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ABSTRACT

This report describes the results of eight focus groups held in four cities to explore findings of a comprehensive review of more than 30 recent public opinion polls concerning higher education. These findings were: (1) higher education enjoys a reservoir of good will; (2) a college education is seen as an essential credential for success; (3) the public is broadly committed to equity but as an income issue and not gender- or race-specific; (4) public good will is tempered by concerns about cost; and (5) consequently, the public sees a role for government in education similar to that in health care financing. The major findings of the focus groups suggest that the public is caught in a dilemma; on one hand, they are convinced that a college degree is becoming more and more important for a good job and access to a middle-class lifestyle, but on the other, that there is a widespread feeling that rising costs are pushing a college education beyond the reach of ordinary Americans. Fears about rising costs appear to translate into concerns that the opportunity to attend college is decreasing and that the situation will get worse. There is a strong feeling that government must step-in and make a college education financially attainable. (JLS)

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First Impressions and Second Thoughts: Public Support for Higher Education

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A Report to the American Council on Education

HE 028 941

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First Impressions and Second Thoughts: Public Support for Higher Education

James Harvey & Associates

A Report for
the American Council on Education

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Introduction

This report on public perceptions of higher education was prepared for the Board of Directors of the American Council on Education. It was initiated at the request of ACE's Office of Governmental Relations to provide a better picture of public opinion as higher education entered a new period of constrained budgets at the federal, state, and local levels.

This report describes the results of focus groups held in four cities to explore some of the findings of a briefing presented to the Board at ACE's 75th Annual Meeting. That briefing ("Good Will and Growing Worry") summarized a comprehensive review of more than 30 recent public opinion polls that touched on higher education. During the briefing, several major findings were presented to the Board:

- Higher education enjoys a huge reservoir of public good will. The public believes higher education is good for the economy, good for society, and good for its students.
- A college degree is seen as an essential credential for success in life and work. The degree is as important today as a high school diploma was yesterday.
- The public is broadly committed to equity, but sees it as a function of income, not of race or gender.
- This good will is accompanied by growing concerns. In particular, people are worried about costs. "Sticker shock" is a real phenomenon in the public mind, and people believe that costs are escalating beyond the reach of the middle class.
- Consequently, people see government as an important part of the solution to the cost problem in very much the same way they see government as an important part of the solution to the health care

cost problem: Education, like health care, is an essential public good that people believe they no longer can afford. The government needs to step in, either by helping foot the bill or by helping control the costs.

The focus groups described in this report were held between March and July 1993 in San Antonio, Texas; Cherry Hill, New Jersey; Detroit, Michigan; and Memphis, Tennessee. They were organized by independent contractors in each of the cities. The contractors knew only that James Harvey & Associates were interested in interviewing a representative group of local citizens (young and old, college graduates and non-college graduates, majority and minority) about higher education. At the authors' request, the contractors screened out individuals who reported they worked for a college or university.

Prior experience with similar groups in California indicated that non-college graduates were reluctant to speak up when seated at the same table with people with degrees. Consequently, this report actually summarizes eight separate focus groups – two in each city, one made up of people who identified themselves as holding a degree, the other composed of people who identified themselves as being high school graduates. All told, about 50 people participated in the focus groups.

It is important to understand that focus groups are not intended to be nationally representative barometers of public opinion. To obtain such a barometer, a poll must be conducted, or, as in the case of the January briefing, existing poll results must be examined. The value of focus groups lies elsewhere: Properly conducted, they illuminate the public's thinking, explore the motivations behind public opinion, and permit the testing of hypotheses about why people think the way they do.

This report concentrates mainly on what was learned during these focus groups. The findings are discussed in the context of the January review of poll results. In addition, the California Higher Education Policy Center (CHEPC) was, by coincidence, interested in exploring nearly identical issues as it assessed the implications of funding reductions for higher education in California. With the consent of ACE, the authors provided the January briefing and the data supporting it to CHEPC researchers; the briefing helped frame the Center's work (eight focus groups in California and a state and national poll of public attitudes toward higher education). In return, ACE obtained the benefit of CHEPC's work, including findings from its California focus groups and a nationwide poll conducted by the Public Agenda Foundation. These findings also are cited in this document to illustrate specific points.

First Impressions and Second Thoughts

Most of the people professionally associated with higher education worry about a host of concerns that rarely appear on the public's radar screen. At the same time, average citizens have a number of concerns about education beyond high school, and some of these issues receive little attention from the leaders of higher education.

A glance at journals and newspapers covering higher education, or at the reading lists and journals of opinion makers, suggests that higher education is troubled – its leaders worried about access and revenues, campuses torn by highly polarized arguments about "political correctness," a professoriate more interested in research than in teaching, widespread anxiety about threats to quality, and disturbing accounts of financial irregularities and excessive compensation.

But the view from Main Street is quite different. There are major concerns about higher education, but the concerns focus not so much on the campus itself as on how to gain entry and stay there. The general public, like the experts and professionals, is very worried about access to higher education and how to pay for it. However, it dismisses "political correctness" as a tempest in a teapot, thinks of the professors as decent people, takes pride in the quality of the enterprise, and has not fully focused on allegations of government over-billing or over-compensation.

To the extent the general public worries in any serious way about any-thing beyond access and costs, it is likely to think that there are many students on campus who don't belong there and would be better off in a trade school.

First Impressions

How does the general public make judgments about higher education? What measure does it use in developing its first impressions? In each of the focus groups, respondents were first asked to mention what comes to mind when they think about *K–12 education*. The question was used both to obtain a contrast with attitudes about higher education and to break the ice by getting people to talk about a familiar subject. The results were remarkably uniform. When people are asked about pre-college education, the first things they think of are drugs, crime, lack of discipline, poor performance, and a general sense that public schools are in disastrous shape. People talk freely about these issues with great intensity and a lot of emotion.

The following comments typify all four communities and are virtually indistinguishable from remarks made during CHEPC's California focus groups:

> *The weapons that kids take to school...there is no comparison to the way it was when I went to school.* (Memphis, N)*

> *I don't think the discipline is there the way it used to be. The kids can get away with anything they want to. If a teacher spanks a kid, the parents can sue. No one respects the teachers, or education, or anything.* (Detroit, C)

> *I think of dope. When my kids were in high school, it was already prevalent at that time. Now my grandchildren are eight and five, and it*

*Throughout this document, the notations "C" and "N" mean, respectively, college graduate and non-college graduate.

scares the heck out of me because it is around these young kids. It is horrible. It destroys people. (Cherry Hill, N)

When people are asked to talk about higher education, however, their first impressions are entirely different. Two associations were most common: the cost of college and the necessity of a college education in today's world. Rather than being perceived as something which is fundamentally in turmoil, higher education usually is perceived as a positive thing that is, unfortunately, extremely expensive.

The cost – that is what I think of. My kid went to college for two semesters before he joined the army. It cost me a fortune. (Detroit, N)

Every kid should want to go. Because from kindergarten to 12th grade, they have to, but after that they don't have to do school any more. They should get the degree, too. You need it to get a job. (Cherry Hill, N)

When I think of higher education, I think of medical training – a lot of work and time to put into it and get through it to get to where you want to be. (Cherry Hill, N)

Many people also mentioned the social side of campus life as a first impression – parties, alcohol, and an over-emphasis on sports – but none of these topics was as common as costs and the necessity of the college credential. Moreover, the level of intensity and concern about these issues does not begin to approach the public's emotional feelings about K–12 education. Indeed, participants in most focus groups (both nationally and in California) struggled as they tried to express what they thought about American higher education, whereas they offered their opinions about elementary and secondary education easily and spontaneously.

When people think of K–12 education, then, they think of an institution that is essentially a failure. (Significantly, those with children in school, especially in elementary school, sometimes have a more positive view of public education.) But the thought of college conjures up visions of a park-like setting where attractive, healthy young people stroll around. It costs a lot of money, and some of these young people may be wasting their time and their parents' money, but at least they are not violent. Even their vices – partying, drinking, and lack of direction – have a certain traditional charm, and many adults indulged in them at one time or another.

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Confirming First Impressions

Obviously, cost and access are the big issues on people's minds, but a number of other issues also emerge that confirm the general sense that the public is well disposed toward higher education. People are proud of the quality of higher education in the United States. They respect the research function of the university. They are inclined to think of the adults on college campuses as people with high ethical standards. And they are usually (although not universally) inclined to blame the general economy, rather than administrators or faculty members, for increases in college costs.

Quality

Higher education has a reputation for quality. Many of our respondents repeatedly expressed pride in the prestige of top local universities, spontaneously mentioning Princeton, Rutgers, Vanderbilt, and the University of Michigan. The presence of foreign students on American campuses was often offered as evidence of the high quality of American higher education. Surveys show that many Americans are disheartened by the inability of American industry to compete with Japan, but focus group participants were proud of the fact that students from all over the world (including Japanese students) come to this country to study at American universities. The idea that someone would come to the United States to study in an American high school, by contrast, was dismissed as inconceivable.

> *The colleges, like Trinity College here in San Antonio, draw people nationally and internationally.* (San Antonio, C)

The colleges and universities must be doing something right, because there are a lot of people from other countries that are coming and nosing out local kids with higher SAT scores. The universities seem to be highly sought after. (Detroit, C)

We have people from all over the world studying here at Princeton. (Cherry Hill, N)

These attitudes are identical to those expressed in the California focus groups. The attitudes may betray some confusion about who is a foreign student and who is an immigrant. Nonetheless, Americans take pride in the fact that in higher education, the nation possesses a world-class product.

Research

Research is also quite popular with the public. A 1991 Roper survey indicated, for example, that 86 percent of the public favors more government support for university high technology research. There are always people who will complain about "golden fleece" research projects, or about expensive studies of how fast catsup flows from a bottle or the reproductive lives of insects. Generally, however, people in these focus groups (and the California focus groups) associated university research with breakthroughs in high technology, medicine, and human progress:

I've had a medical problem that medical science has not found the answer for, so I support research. There are always new ways to do things. (Detroit, N)

Look at all the things we found out in outer space that they never could have found out here, because of the weightlessness. Look at the medications and plastics, stuff that will do us all good in the next ten years. (Detroit, N)

It means finding new things. Keeping up with changing times. (Detroit, N)

What is particularly interesting about these comments is that each was offered by a non-college graduate.

Academicians Are Ethical People

The largest number of employees of higher education, college professors, also have a good reputation in the public's eye. Indeed, in an age when confidence ratings for all professions are dropping, college professors do quite well. A recent survey found that 51 percent of the population rated

the ethical standards of college teachers as high, and 39 percent rated them as average. Only 5 percent rated college professors as having low standards of honesty and ethics (Gallup, June 1992).

Although some focus group members felt that college professors are overpaid, others defended the professoriate as underpaid, or as deserving high salaries on the basis of the amount of work they put into their subjects. As discussed later, college administrators are perceived as overpaid, but there may be a certain reflex quality to this response: people typically think of administrators of all kinds as overpaid bureaucrats presiding over bloated empires.

> *The teachers are underpaid.* (San Antonio, C)

> *I don't think it is the instructors who are driving the costs up. I have three sisters. Two are high school teachers and one teaches college – she makes the least of the three.* (Detroit, N)

> *It's not like doctors. You don't see many teachers driving around in Mercedes and Cadillacs.* (Cherry Hill, N)

Education is generally regarded as a low-paying profession with an element of altruism and public service. While college professors may be perceived as out of touch, eccentric, or unrealistic – or even as bad teachers – they are rarely perceived as drains on the public purse.

Sports as Big Business

In one highly visible area, however, public attention to ethical issues is quite keen. Focus group members were not invited to concentrate on sports, but many people raised the issue spontaneously. For many respondents, the emphasis on televised sports has fostered the impression that the athletics end of higher education is a big business, and that there is a great deal of money floating around in the system.

> *TV has transformed college into big business. If the team is not winning, there goes the coach. They had a big scandal down there in Texas, they wanted to field a team to get the TV revenues.* (Cherry Hill, N)

> *U of M football. They are generating over $5 million a weekend, not counting the merchandising. They are probably investing money. It is big business. If they aren't investing, there should be a lot of people in jail.* (Detroit, C)

I'm a little suspicious of sports programs. I think especially large universities tend to spend a lot of money in that area that could be better spent on research or other areas. I think it's been steadily increasing since television sports hit its mark. (San Antonio, C)

Costs: Colleges Not Necessarily at Fault

In part because college professors are thought to be underpaid, institutions are not held fully responsible for recent cost increases. In this case, higher education enjoys a distinct advantage over health care institutions. In the case of health care, the public's views are clear: What is driving up costs is not the miracle of high-technology medicine, but greed, even corruption, among doctors, lawyers, drug companies, and insurance companies.

When it comes to higher education, however, the general public is at least as willing to blame factors beyond academic control (especially inflation) for cost increases as it is to blame colleges and universities. In California, for example, focus group members launched into bitter denunciations of the incompetence of state government to explain why college costs are going up. In all four of the national communities, participants echoed a non-college graduate in Detroit: "College costs are going up just like the cost of anything else you want to buy."

The CHEPC/Public Agenda survey asked why college costs are rising. Inflation (73 percent) ran just ahead of administrators' salaries (71 percent) as the most popular explanation when the categories "a very important reason" and "a somewhat important reason" were added together (see Table 1). The most visible university employees (professors) were less often perceived as a major part of the problem.

Table 1
Why Are College Prices Going Up?

Reason	Very or Somewhat Important
Prices are going up for everything else	73%
Overpaid administrators	71%
Overpaid professors	55%

Higher Education Enjoys the Benefit of the Doubt

Higher education also enjoys the benefit of the doubt in the public's mind on who pays for the enterprise and who is responsible if students fail.

Who Pays

Many people believe that the costs of running colleges and universities (even state institutions) are paid largely by the consumers themselves, rather than by the population at large. The high cost of a college education, then, is a problem for students and their parents, but not for those without college-bound children. Once again, the contrast with K–12 education is instructive. In the case of K–12 education, there are no specific fees, and the costs are covered by a dedicated tax, often one that is debated in public and added to homeowners' monthly mortgage checks.

In higher education, by contrast, students and families pay substantial, visible tuition and fees, while state and federal subsidies (at least for four-year institutions) are buried in general state revenues. The drumbeat of news coverage about rising college fees appears to have further confused the public about just how much tax-funded government support goes to higher education.

In several of the focus groups, respondents were asked what percentage of the costs of education at state institutions is covered by tuition and fees versus contributions from tax money. The question appeared to surprise people. Some people assumed that the state universities were entirely supported by tuition and student fees. Equally interesting, most of the respondents had never really thought about the question.

> *I didn't know that the Michigan colleges were subsidized.* (Detroit, N)

> *I guess maybe Tennessee pays 25 percent, and the kids and their parents pay the rest. I really don't know.* (Memphis, C)

The sense that the consumers bear the costs came out most clearly when people expressed anger at students who spend their time socializing and partying instead of applying themselves. Several people across the country said things like: "My neighbor's kids are in college; they have no idea what they are doing there. They are just wasting her money. It infuriates me."

But no one said: "These kids are wasting *my* money."

Responsibility and Motivation

Higher education also profits from what might be called the burden of responsibility. When focus group respondents speak of K–12 education, their concern is often directed at parents, teachers, and the schools

themselves, rather than at students. People appear to believe that when K–12 students do poorly, it is because society, their parents, and the schools have failed them. But the picture shifts dramatically when it comes to postsecondary education. In higher education, the responsibility rests with college students themselves.

By margins of nearly three to one (71 percent to 23 percent), the CHEPC/Public Agenda survey shows the public believes that the benefit a student gets from attending college depends in large part on how much effort the student puts in, rather than on the quality of the school.

This belief was confirmed by the focus groups. From the perspective of focus group members, college is not obligatory, students have a great deal of choice about which college to go to, and they pay a good deal of money to attend. All of this means that it is up to the students themselves to make higher education a successful experience.

To put this another way, most respondents believe the key factor in higher education is student motivation. A really motivated student can get an excellent education anywhere, and the most prestigious (and expensive) education will be wasted on someone who is unmotivated.

> *I think the students would have to work harder in college. If you go, you've made a commitment. It costs a lot of money, it's something you're investing in, you're using your parents' money.* (San Antonio, N)

> *If a kid applies himself, he will rise to the top, regardless of where he goes.* (Detroit, C)

> *I don't think it is the college or the university or the tuition that matters, but the individual. I think I could go to Huckpucken College and get as much out of it as anywhere, and get as much education as I want to get. I could avail myself of the library and study just as hard as if I was at Vanderbilt.* (Memphis, C)

> *I would think you could get the same education out of any college that you go to; it is self-application. You could go to any ding-a-ling community college. Now, compared to the University of Michigan, you might not get the accreditation. But the same person can come out of one or the other and both do the job.* (Detroit, N)

For many of our respondents, then, the primacy of motivation takes the pressure off the institutions themselves. Since higher education is a proving ground for motivation, even administrative problems can be seen as advantages. In the California focus groups, for example, respondents found

that the difficulty students experience enrolling in classes required for a degree is often a good thing: Getting a college degree teaches perseverance, organization, and problem solving.

The Horatio Alger Syndrome

National surveys show that the public believes that many qualified people do not have the opportunity to attend college. Nationally, according to the CHEPC/Public Agenda poll, only 37 percent think that most of the people who are qualified to go to college have the opportunity to do so. The majority (60 percent) think that many qualified people are excluded.

In the focus groups, however, people tended to qualify this attitude. The general idea seems to be that no one is absolutely excluded; the problem is merely that the hurdles get higher. Most of the focus group participants seemed to feel that the Horatio Alger story can be repeated by students today: Anyone who is sufficiently motivated and really wants to go to college can do so. Such a person might have to live at home, attend part time, and work, as well, but achieving the dream of a college education still is available to anyone who is motivated enough to work for it.

> *If a kid really wants to go, he can go, through loans and what not. He may have to work while he goes to school, but he can do it.*
> (Cherry Hill, N)

> *If you want to go, you can, either to a two-year school or for four years.*
> (San Antonio, C)

While the respondents frequently discussed the overwhelming cost of colleges, there was also a widespread feeling that many college students have it too easy. Many of the respondents' comments confirmed a finding from the CHEPC/Public Agenda poll: Two-thirds (67 percent) of the respondents think that it is a problem that "many young people are just wasting their time and money in college because they don't know what else to do with their lives." For some of the focus group participants, the idea of a few more obstacles would, in many cases, be a good thing, rather than a bad thing.

Reiterating the Good News

Compared with many of the other things that people worry about today, higher education comes off quite well. College is perceived as expensive and overpriced, and people are concerned that the price of a college education is spiraling out of the reach of many people. Even so, it seems to be

possible for anyone who wants to get a college education to get one. On the bright side, colleges are perceived as safe environments, and as one of the few institutions that can still evoke some pride in international comparisons. Higher education has a virtually unique advantage in that failure tends to be blamed on the consumer, not on the provider. The most numerous employees of universities (faculty members) are perceived as honest, reasonably paid, and probably harmless. College may be expensive and a waste of money for some, but people think that the money comes from someone else's pocket.

Second Thoughts

Behind this optimistic picture, however, lie some second thoughts that are cause for concern. The support described above exists. It is real. But it is almost as thin as it is broad.

In fact, most people know very little about the academic world and are not, therefore, deeply concerned about it. Higher education is not a "high-intensity" issue for the public in the same way that K–12 education and health care costs are. Virtually everyone has been to a high school or to a hospital, but many have no recent first-hand experience with what happens on campus. While elementary and secondary schools deal with parents on a daily basis, most of the administrative issues in colleges are handled by students themselves. Participants in the focus groups, whether college graduates or non-college graduates, reflected this relative public ignorance.

Several consequences flow from this situation. First, the public cannot be expected to rush to the defense of higher education when budget cutbacks threaten. Second, the public values the credential issued by the college (i.e., the degree), not the education it provides, in part because people doubt that general education itself is of any economic value. Third, these focus group members probably would support legislation to divert funds from higher education to vocational schools. Finally, a lack of sophisticated knowledge about higher education makes it easy for the public to focus on one thing that it has no trouble understanding: allegations that administrators are overpaid.

Public Ignorance: Benign or Malign?

Ignorance can be bliss. On the one hand, the fact that people are not deeply concerned about higher education means that most are not greatly troubled

by events that transfix academicians and receive a lot of national publicity. "Political correctness" and campus racial tension did not interest participants in either the four focus groups or the California focus groups. Most of the Cherry Hill respondents, for example, live virtually beside Philadelphia's University of Pennsylvania. They were aware of Penn's "water buffalo" incident, but dismissed it by literally laughing it off. The lone African-American woman in the Cherry Hill group was not familiar with the incident.

In the California focus groups, Stanford University's billing difficulties generated little interest among the participants. Asked whether mismanagement was an issue on campus, one participant responded, "Oh, of course there is waste everywhere, and we've had this problem at Stanford. But that's the exception."

On the other hand, ignorance has its costs. In these focus groups, nothing was said to indicate that people are ready to rush in to defend higher education against cutbacks and belt tightening. Most people shared the view of a Detroit man who said, "I really don't feel qualified to say. Like everywhere else, I'm sure money is wasted, but I don't know where." While people are not outraged by waste in college budgets, they are prepared to believe there is some fat in the system and offer no sense that any particular college function is so vital that it cannot be cut. Indeed, if educational quality ultimately depends on student motivation rather than on institutions, there may be a fair amount of public tolerance for a "less is good" attitude.

Beyond this easy-going tolerance for academic belt tightening, a number of other attitudes require the attention of higher education leaders.

We Want College Degrees, Not a College Education

Everyone acknowledges that a college education is increasingly important for success in the job market. But with little probing, it became apparent that for many people, the focus is on a college *degree*, not a college *education*. Indeed, the public feels that young people are *forced* to attend college, even though ideally they might be better off attending a trade school.

Some people stress the idea that a college education is needed because of the educational failures of high schools:

> *It should be mandatory. I don't think they teach you enough up until you get to college. Today kids have to have college, either a community college or a big-deal college.* (Cherry Hill, N)

Others believe that a degree is simply a useful sorting and credentialing device for employers:

The college degree is just a way for the employers to weed them out. There are so many people wanting a job, how do you separate them? (Memphis, C)

When my kids are out there looking for jobs, no one will even look at them without a master's degree, but where is it going to stop? In the future, will everyone have to have a handful of Ph.D. degrees? (Memphis, C)

For a lot of jobs, like city jobs, even packing up garbage, you have to have that degree. (Detroit, N)

What is missing is any sense that a college education is required because we are living in a high-tech world with a knowledge-intensive economy, where even the best high school skills are not enough to equip the most motivated person for life and citizenship. What people are saying is that many employers will not look at a person without a degree; they are not saying that job seekers actually need to have attended college to do the job.

Value of Education: Attitudes of Graduates

What is the value of a college education? The answer to this question tended to vary widely depending on whether respondents were or were not college graduates. Graduates often expressed the attitude that a higher education is valuable in and of itself, both for teaching new ways of thinking and for open-ing up new possibilities for greater satisfaction in life and work. This attitude also was expressed with great conviction, often quite movingly, by some respondents whose children had attended college although they themselves had not.

College gives you a broader vision. That is the difference between college and trade school. You come away with a different outlook. (Detroit, C)

There is something else about college, which I didn't understand until I saw the difference in my children. Their way of thinking: college taught them how to think differently. Then they could apply that to their job. (San Antonio, N)

It teaches you discipline, self-motivation, how to organize things. (Cherry Hill, C)

My kids changed. They went away kids and they came back more thoughtful, more independent. (Cherry Hill, N)

Perhaps not surprisingly, many of those who have been to college place great value on it, regardless of the direct economic consequences to them. One woman said, for example:

> *With my children, it is not will you go to college, but which college. That is just part of your education. I am a travel agent and I don't use anything I learned in college on my job, but it is an important part of your life and training for everything. But if you want a good living and a good profession, four years is not enough.* (Detroit, C)

Value of Education: Attitudes of Non-Graduates

Attitudes of the non-college educated were strikingly different. For the non-college educated, the value of college attendance is seen as largely instrumental. The purpose of going to college is to get a better job, either by getting specific job training or by getting a credential that will impress employers. The belief that the strength of this link is waning in today's economy, however, also creates reservations about the value of college attendance. (The sentiment that a college degree is not as useful as it once was is even stronger in California, where an ongoing recession has taken a huge toll on employment possibilities for the college educated.)

Who Needs a General Education?

For those who have not been to college themselves, the value of a broad general education is mystifying. One person referred to programs in the liberal arts as "trash can programs." If one is going to college to obtain job skills, why would one study anything other than those job skills?

> *You don't go to college to learn how to think. You should learn how to think in grade school, and by the time you get to college, you should already know all you need to know about how to learn. My nieces are in college. They do everything on calculators and they tape the lectures. They should learn how to work those problems out by themselves.* (Detroit, N)

> *I thought high school was to get you ready for college – college is to train you to learn your field. But they spend the first two years just teaching you the basic things. You only get to your field in the last two years. I want to be a programmer, but if I go to Memphis State, I'll have to spend the first two years learning English and algebra. I should have learned that in high school.* (Memphis, N)

My son is taking general subjects – he is spending all of this money learning nothing. Just going for the sake of going doesn't make any sense. (Memphis, N)

If times get tough, they will cut back on the trash can programs – liberal arts, English majors, a four-year degree in art appreciation. (Cherry Hill, N)

They could make cuts in the way colleges are run. There are a lot of subjects you really don't need for whatever you want to work at. (San Antonio, N)

Generally speaking, many of those who had been to college thought that college was a good place to go to grow up. The non-college respondents, however, felt that it only makes sense for young people to go to college if they have a specific field in mind, and when they get to college, they should study primarily that field. The following logic appears to drive this thinking: If you know what you want to do, go to college. If you don't know what you want to do, go to work.

When you leave high school, you should have a goal. If you don't, you should take a job or travel or join the Coast Guard. Then you come back to school when you do have a goal. (Detroit, N)

Who Needs a College Education?

When college graduates are having trouble finding jobs, the job/college link is a less attractive rationale for supporting higher education. In fact, the focus groups provided evidence that respondents (especially those without a college degree) are starting to rethink the importance of a college education entirely. The surveys and the focus groups demonstrate nearly universal endorsement of the importance of a college degree. But in focus groups, especially when non-college graduates were talking among themselves, we saw the emergence of subtle questions not only about the value of the education, but even about the value of the degree.

My son goes to college, and you have to wonder if it's worth it. A lot of kids don't make it, and then a lot come out and still can't get a job. You wonder if maybe they shouldn't be out working in business, instead of coming out with these basic courses that might not do them any good. It's hard to do anything with a liberal arts degree. (San Antonio, N)

I want to go back to school to get a degree – but even if you have a degree, you don't have a job, so why waste your time and money and

not necessarily have a job? Someone ought to guarantee that you get a job. (Memphis, N)

I don't place as much emphasis on it as I used to, maybe because the job market is so terrible. (Detroit, N)

The industries are downsizing, and that discourages the high school kids from going to college. They think: Why should I pay all of that money and work so hard, if there is no job at the other end of it? (Cherry Hill, N)

Anti-Intellectual Strain: College Not for Everyone

Americans generally place a high value on education of all sorts and seemingly live by the principle enunciated by one wag that "You can't be too rich, too thin, or too educated." But the focus groups indicate that just below the veneer of respect for higher education stands the American as utilitarian citizen – a practical, competitive person who is suspicious of theory, uncomfortable with speculation, perhaps unconsciously anti-intellectual.

In the focus groups, a barely submerged view appeared: We are an over-educated society, rather than an under-educated one. Higher education is an individual good, rather than a social one. Despite concerns about the job/college linkage, most respondents were convinced that a college degree would give an individual an advantage in today's tight labor market. To these respondents, that defines the value of the degree: it permits individuals to get ahead of others. But there was little sense that as a society, we need to send more people to college.

When I was young, you started as a kid working part time going to high school, then you went to be an apprentice. Then you progressed into the trade. You started as a "gopher" and worked your way up. Formal education is great; but how many lawyers and computer scientists do we need? We have too many of them that can't get jobs already. We need more people to build things than to think about them. (Cherry Hill, N)

There are three lawyers for everyone who is running around on the street, and too many engineers. (Detroit, N)

The Need for More Trade Schools

In light of the practical nature of many respondents, it is not surprising that several expressed the view that too many people go to college because there are no other satisfactory post–high school programs for them. Many of the

respondents, both college and non-college educated, in these focus groups and in California, felt the country needs many more apprenticeship and trade programs.

> *It is a big waste. I have guys that I work with that have degrees and they are doing the same things I am doing. A trade school is enough for a regular guy, unless you want to be a doctor or a scientist.* (Detroit, N)

> *Not everyone is college material. There should be something for them, like an apprenticeship.* (Cherry Hill, C)

> *Sometimes the wrong people go to college for the wrong reasons. Let's face it, we're always going to need sheetrockers and policemen. Not everyone has to go to college. Some people can learn a trade, and as long as they can make a good living and contribute to society, they don't need a college education.* (San Antonio, C)

> *I think we're sending too many people to college. A lot of students who go would be happier doing something else. But it's expected, and when you go to get a job, a college degree is needed. So you say, "Well, I'll go so at least I can write on this piece of paper."* (San Antonio, C)

Administrators' Compensation

In examining people's thinking about why college costs are rising, we noted that people are generally inclined to attribute the causes to inflation or to other factors over which higher education has no control. However, in the focus groups completed nationally (and also in California), several people pointed to excessive salaries for administrators as a factor. For example, the San Antonio participant who asserted that faculty members are underpaid went on to complain about administrative pay:

> *The teachers are underpaid; the administration is overpaid.* (San Antonio, C)

A Cherry Hill participant also expressed concern about administrators' salaries, but then dismissed the problem:

> *The colleges aren't corrupt. Some of the deans are overpaid, but that is a mere drop in the bucket when you've got 15,000 students who pay $10,000 per year.* (Cherry Hill, N)

Managers and administrators take a beating in virtually every field, so the significance of these comments is open to question. Nevertheless, they take on new importance when the CHEPC/Public Agenda findings reported earlier (in Table 1, page 8) are re-examined to focus only on the factors considered "very important" in driving up college prices. As Table 2 (page 20) demonstrates, a different picture emerges when the "very important" lens is applied. Here, overpaid administrators are seen as the main culprit; general price inflation lags significantly behind, with faculty salaries bringing up the rear.

Table 2
Why Are College Prices Going Up?

Reason	Very Important
Overpaid administrators	41%
Prices are going up for everything else	31%
Overpaid professors	26%

These are troubling numbers for academic leaders. Four out of ten members of the general public express the view that administrators' salaries are a "very important" factor contributing to rising college costs. Undoubtedly, some of these people are indulging the universal instinct to "bash" managers. Others probably are focusing on something they can understand in the midst of their generally confused notion of higher education's finances. But it also is probably true that some portion of these respondents have begun to pay attention to reports of financial irregularities and excessive compensation for some administrators. If that is true, these people are likely to be among the best informed and most observant members of the public, potential opinion makers in their communities.

The general findings reported earlier in Table 1 (i.e., the public is inclined to give colleges the benefit of the doubt about costs) may prove a false comfort. If, in fact, the findings in Table 2 include a significant proportion of local opinion makers, then these leaders already have made up their minds that something is not quite right. Higher education leaders need to pay attention to this possibility, because opinion makers such as these are likely to have the ears of county council members, mayors, local and state officials, and state and federal legislators.

The Public's Dilemma

The major findings of both the polls and these focus groups point in the same direction: the public is caught in something of a dilemma. People are struggling with a clash between two instincts. On the one hand, they are convinced that a college degree is becoming more and more important for a good job and access to a middle-class lifestyle. At the same time, there is a widespread feeling that rising costs are pushing a college education beyond the reach of ordinary Americans.

Importance of a College Education

A June 1990 poll by Time/CNN/Yankelovich indicated that 80 percent of Americans believe that young people starting out today have little chance of success without a college education. Public Agenda's 1993 poll confirms that finding: Eight out of 10 people (79 percent) are convinced that high school graduates should go to college "because in the long run, they will have better job prospects."

Indeed, access to an affordable college education has taken on the status of a right. The Public Agenda poll revealed nearly universal agreement (89 percent) that society should not allow financial constraints to prevent a qualified and motivated student from getting a college education.

The four focus groups provided ample evidence that the polls are correct.

Declining Opportunity

At the same time, the ACE January poll review revealed considerable public concern about the escalating costs of higher education. A 1991 ABC News/*Washington Post* survey, for example, found that 65 percent of the public

worry a great deal that a "good college education is becoming too expensive." Fears about rising costs seem to translate quickly into concerns about diminishing opportunity because there is also a strong sense that the opportunity to attend college is decreasing and that the situation will get worse, not better. Polls completed by Gallup and by ABC News/*Washington Post* in 1989 and 1990, respectively, indicate that the public anticipates it will be more difficult to afford college in 10 years than it is today.

The CHEPC/Public Agenda poll points in the same directions, although not as strongly: That survey found that 60 percent of Americans believe that many qualified students do not currently have the opportunity to go to college. Fifty-five percent of these respondents say it is more difficult to get a college education now than it was 10 years ago, and an even greater number (66 percent) think it will be even more difficult 10 years from now.

Again, the four focus groups strongly back the evidence from the polls.

Clearly, people are starting to worry about the situation and want something to be done. Forty-one percent of the Public Agenda respondents reported a high level of concern about higher education in their state (even compared with other issues, such as the economy and health care), and an even greater share (54 percent) reported that public higher education in their state requires a fundamental overhaul.

These findings confirm the hypothesis presented to the ACE Board in January: While somewhat less intense, attitudes toward higher education closely resemble attitudes toward health care. Generally, people are satisfied with the quality of services provided by both kinds of institutions, but they are deeply worried that increases in costs will mean that more and more people will be denied access. As a result, they are willing to think about the need for fundamental overhaul of both systems. The call for overhaul reflects not so much dissatisfaction with the institutions as an inability to tolerate a situation where a basic good is seen as slipping out of reach.

The Future

Our respondents had a somewhat conflicting view of the future of higher education. In effect, people see a clash developing between the increasing pressure to have a college degree and the escalating costs of obtaining one. Some people expressed the view that college enrollments will start to drop, so that in a few years only the elite will receive a higher education. Others felt that the government will somehow step in to make a college education attainable. People with young children expressed a great deal of concern about how they will afford it themselves:

> *I think it is coming full cycle. When I was young, only the rich went to college. It is coming around to the same thing. Even with state colleges, the tuitions are going up and up and up. It will come around to only the rich being able to afford to go to college.* (Cherry Hill, N)

> *Government will have to step in to keep things at a ceiling so it doesn't blow up. It can only get harder.* (Cherry Hill, N)

> *I don't know how my daughters will be able to go to college when they get old enough, unless they have rich boyfriends. I sure won't be able to send them there.* (Detroit, N)

These worries about costs appear to be driving the finding reported above that 54 percent of Americans feel that state public colleges should be fundamentally overhauled.

Solutions: Help Students Help Themselves and Provide New Options

As people wrestled with the issues, a set of principles seemed to emerge. These principles converge on two approaches that make sense to people. First, the principles:

- **Opportunity for Everyone.** Most of our respondents want to preserve the opportunity for any qualified and motivated person to go to college, regardless of financial status. As one San Antonio respondent said: "Colleges should be rigorous places where if you can't cut the mustard, you fail. People should be weeded out, but not by money."

- **A Give-away Is a Throw-away.** At the same time, many people feel that students do not take college seriously enough and that they will not value the experience unless they make sacrifices to attain it. Seventy-six percent of the CHEPC/Public Agenda respondents agree that "students don't appreciate the value of a college education when they have no personal responsibility for paying for what it costs." (Forty-eight percent agree strongly, and 28 percent, somewhat.)

- **Institutions Will Not Keep Costs Down.** There is little support for government aid to colleges and universities to help bring down tuition. Most of the respondents feel that such aid would be absorbed by the colleges, rather than be put to use helping students. (Said one Cherry Hill participant, "There's no point pouring money down a rat hole.")

- **Why Should I Pay to Send You to College?** Many of the respondents feel that the consumers themselves should bear the brunt of costs. Indeed, several people questioned why they should pay for someone else's college education. One Detroit man said, "If you want to go to college, it should be paid for by you or your parents." In fact, several questioned whether parents should be required to pay for their children's expenses. "The parents already had the burden of raising the kid, and that's a stage in his life. After high school, he should be having his wings and ready to fly off." (San Antonio, N)

- **Why Do You Need to Go to College?** In the end, all the comments about the utility of general education and the value of the education and the degree came down to one point: The public believes many people are in college today because other opportunities for more appropriate vocational training are not available. The solution: open more trade and technical schools.

These broad ideas point to the way ahead in the public's mind. Many of the respondents want to maintain opportunities to attend college, and they want to ensure that no one is excluded by economic factors. On the other hand, they do not want to pay any more money to support a college education for others, particularly when they think the population may be over-educated and job opportunities for the college-educated may be declining.

The Solution

The solution that jumps out at people is twofold: find ways to help students help themselves by making it possible for more of them to pay for their education, and create new programs that emphasize vocational skills. What people seem to want are work-study programs, tuition hooked to national service, low-interest loans (with fail-safe collection), or anything that provides a way for the student to finance his or her own education. They also want much more rigorous attention to school-to-work issues, perhaps emphasizing apprenticeship programs and vocational and trade schools. These approaches seem to satisfy all concerns. They maintain – perhaps expand – opportunity, screen out the unmotivated, and provide new and better opportunities for many students who are enrolled on campuses only because, in the public's mind, vocational alternatives do not exist.

In the Public Agenda survey, researchers presented the public with four different strategies for financing higher education: (1) provide students with more opportunities to work, (2) provide more loans, (3) provide more grants, and (4) provide more direct aid to colleges. The clear winner: provide more opportunities for students to work for the privilege of obtaining a college degree. (See Table 3.)

Table 3
Strategies for Financing Higher Education

Use More Often	Agree
Opportunities to work for financial aid	80%
Make money available for student loans	62%
Give money to colleges and universities so they can keep prices down	52%
Grant money directly to students	43%

These results were confirmed by the four focus groups. The public is willing to help people help themselves. It does not want to see people seeking a college education denied the opportunity for financial reasons. At the same time, because it considers the benefits of a college education to accrue almost entirely to individuals with degrees, it has little interest in financing the education of other people. And, surprisingly, some Americans appear to have reached the point where they are unwilling to finance even their own children's college attendance. Hence, comments such as the following were not unusual during the focus groups:

> *I'd like to see them give the money to the kids in loans; maybe you could pay back in 15 years at 4 percent.* (Detroit, C)

> *The thing to do is to help the students, as long as there was a system where the loan will be paid back, and it would be a rotating thing so that other kids could use the money in the future. Today there is the defaulting.* (Cherry Hill, N)

> *The money should be for the students, because it's their investment. Parents want the children to succeed, but it's the children's life, and I think they should take responsibility for it.* (San Antonio, C)

> *If the kids put some money into themselves, they take it seriously.* (Detroit, N)

> *By making the student responsible, it makes it more accessible to more people, because some children who would go to college are from families who wouldn't stand a chance of making the first semester's tuition, but if there was some way of getting a low-interest student loan, they would be there.* (San Antonio, C)

Moreover, the focus groups provided ample support for two surveys that indicate public support for postsecondary vocational training. In the CHEPC/Public Agenda study, 54 percent said that it was a problem that "too many people are going to college instead of to alternatives to college where they can learn trades like plumbing or computer repair." In a 1993 *Newsweek* survey, two-thirds of the population (67 percent) responded that "offering a program which combines academics and on-the-job training for high school students who do not go to college" would "enormously" help the educational system.

Implications

Based on these focus groups, combined with the January review of opinion polls and the work of the California Higher Education Policy Center, several broad implications stand out.

First, the public and the experts are talking past each other on one significant issue. Many observers, worried about America's global economic competitiveness, have argued that our citizens generally are not as well educated as those of some of our competitors. Our weakness, from this perspective, is that we are an under-educated society.

Focus group participants do not share this view. To them, American society appears to be over-educated. Our biggest gap is not in higher education, nor in the development of people with advanced skills, but in the trades and technical areas. In people's daily experience, they read that engineers are unemployed, and at the same time they know that it is difficult to find a roofer, a plumber, or an electrician. Business leaders complain about the workplace skills of high school graduates and believe they cannot find enough front-line employees who are "computer literate" or capable of working with today's manufacturing technologies. The solution for many people is to send fewer people to college and more to trade and technical schools. Too many people go to college, in the minds of our respondents, because there is nowhere else for them to go.

Second, the general public has very good feelings about higher education in America. Good will exists. Support for the enterprise is, in general, strong. But the support buttresses something that most academic leaders would not feel terribly comfortable supporting themselves, i.e., the idea that the value of college attendance lies in the credential higher education provides, not in the education it offers.

Moreover, the support is terribly thin because it is, by and large, poorly informed. People like the idea of higher education, but they do not know very much about colleges or universities, how they are financed, the value and extent of their educational offerings, or, in fact, anything else, including how enrollment demographics have changed.

Third, a significant portion of the general public believes that a profound disconnect exists between postsecondary education offerings and what is needed. We cannot quantify the size of this element, but polls indicate it might be a majority of Americans. This sense of disconnect came through most clearly in participants' feelings that too many people are attending college who do not belong there. It came through in the views that society already has too many well-educated people and that more vocational offerings – apprenticeship programs and trade schools – should be available. But it also came through in the surprising number of comments to the effect that liberal education is a waste of time and that the education itself is of little use.

Very few of the four national focus group participants devoted any attention to community college offerings, or to the large number of vocational and technical programs available through these institutions. In California, on the other hand, community colleges received a lot of approval, and community college graduates self-identified themselves as college graduates. Even there, however, community college students and graduates ridiculed the general education requirements they were expected to complete.

Fourth, the public has come to a judgment of sorts about how higher education should be financed. This is a significant implication because it is likely to affect legislators' judgments at the local, state, and national levels. The public wants to help students help themselves. It wants to rely on loans. It wants to emphasize tough loan repayment features. It wants to support grants that are tied to public service and paychecks that are tied to work-study programs. Offered the opportunity to provide more grants to students, the public is likely to say, "No thanks. Students need to contribute to their own education." Offered the explicit opportunity to keep a lid on tuition by subsidizing institutions, the public probably will be equally unimpressed: "No thanks. Institutions will not keep costs down."

Finally, there is enough evidence from the focus groups and the national polls to indicate that an inchoate public consensus on the need to restructure postsecondary education offerings in the United States is beginning to emerge. It is not fully formed, but the elements already can be seen and sensed. It can be seen in the poll findings indicating that a majority of Americans believe public higher education in their states needs to be reshaped. It can be seen in the polls showing that a majority of people

support more vocational offerings. And it could be sensed clearly in the focus groups as participants wondered aloud about the value not only of the degree, but of the education itself.

These implications represent a challenge of sorts to the leaders of American higher education. Of first importance is the need to build on the good will that exists already. The obvious place to start is by helping inform the general public of the scope and extent of higher education's offerings, how those offerings are financed, and who the students really are.

Second, academic leaders need to focus on the public's interest in work preparation. This is not an argument for "vocationalizing" academic curricula; rather, it is an assertion that the interest is legitimate and needs attention. It may be that general employment competency building can be embedded in academic curricula. If so, the public is likely to applaud. It certainly is true that community college offerings are much more diverse than most focus group members (at least in the national focus groups) understand. Academic leaders need to do a better job of communicating the success story of the community college and its contributions to local economies through specific skills development and job training.

Overall, now may well be the time for academic leaders to start thinking seriously about what national and state policies for non-profit postsecondary skills training should look like. Public interest in such training is strong. If non-profit academic leaders do not respond, the profit-making market certainly will. And it will do so in response to the market's interest, not the public's.

Finally, public support for grants needs attention. In some ways, this might not be too difficult. About 43 percent of the public supports providing grants directly to students (see Table 3, page 25) – in a sense, vouchers – to purchase educational services directly. It should be possible to expand that base of support significantly. But with a public more interested in loans, work-study, and grants that are tied to public service than in pure grants, at least part of the effort to build greater support has to start with the message that "All students deserve a level playing field." It is clear from these focus groups that people want to be fair. That is an attractive emotion on which to build. And the fairness card will have to be played if higher education and the American public are to remain true to their own best instincts: equal opportunity for a high-quality education for all.

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